

FACTORS OF CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION IN ETHIOPIA

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The restive sixties with the student movement spawned the tumultuous seventies, which in turn, brought about the transfer of power from a feudal establishment to the first of its kind communist era in Ethiopia. This was then followed by the terror ridden eighties which unleashed a virtual civil war in the country. As if dictated by a heavenly calendar, the decade of the nineties saw an unspeakable level of dislocation of massive numbers of people as the terror of ethnic conflict engulfed the nation. Massive numbers of people lost their homes, their entire belongings, and even their lives as one ethnic group dislodged another in the pursuit of ethnic cleansing—Ethiopian version. Many lost relatives—this writer included—and were forcibly disconnected from the place they called home.

The last decade (2000-2010) was different in many ways than the previous four. It was a period when moderate calm returned to the country, and after the troublesome elections of 2005, the ruling party began to take things much more seriously. It was during that election that the ruling party came to understand that it could lose an election and be driven out of power. As a result, I would categorize this decade as the decade of power consolidation by the ruling party on one hand, and the recognition by the general public as to what could be at stake should the country revert back to its pattern of different forms of crisis every ten years or so, on the other.

For many, what occurred during these troublesome decades does not matter as they are only focused on the present. Generations have come and gone, and new forms of production as well as new patterns of relationships have emerged along with new forms of communication. The trouble is that while past patterns of conduct may not guarantee future behavior, it is also true that those who forget history may be bound to repeat it.

In what follows, I will attempt to identify factors of change and transformation in Ethiopia as cursory indicators that the country is really changing. First, given our collective history over the past 50 years as outlined above, a decade does not make a trend, and caution needs to be exercised in interpreting the indicators. Second, it is very important to note that, while my point here is to identify the factors I believe are relevant, no conclusion should be made about the trajectory of where the country is headed using the markers identified here. Indeed, I expect each reader to make her own conclusions as to what these signs mean or where they may lead us in the future. The only value judgment being made here is that these changes have been observed, at least in the opinion of this writer, and that no objective observer would be comfortable denying that these changes are real.

1. The Re-Greening of the Hills, Mountains, Valleys and Meadows

After denuding the environment for hundreds of years as a result of deforestation, over-cultivation and soil erosion, Ethiopians seem to have realized that the jig is up: conserve the environment or perish. Some conservation work started during the Imperial regime with restrictions imposed on cutting down trees for fuel and construction. But as with most enforcement regimes, there was very little consistency as well as accountability. The Derg had also initiated its own measure of environmental conservation, but two factors contributed to failure: the energy shortages of the Seventies and Eighties; the lack of consistent policy; and inability to marshal the public's trust and confidence. Indeed, most of the devastation to the environment occurred during this period.

Today, there is considerable evidence that the greening of Ethiopia has begun in earnest, and that the public buy-in as well as participation is relatively robust. Evidence of significant progress in Tigray region, Gondar in Amhara region, parts of Oromia as well as the Pastoralist areas in the Somali region is beginning to recover. A pictorial comparison of an area in Eastern Oromia in the nineties and today, for example, reveals significant improvement and progress in recovery efforts. The same is true in the Tigray region. The point is, the public has reactivated its own store of knowledge with regard to the environment and has decided to take positive action in that regard. As a result, the hills, mountains, valleys and meadows of Ethiopia are beginning to recover! Nevertheless, this is still a long way from the reforestation of the land.

2. The Changing Institutions

Arguably, Ethiopia is a very conservative country. Its traditions, culture, religions and social norms are steeped in moderation and deliberate thought and action. Its social, political and economic institutions have been very few, and quite deliberate in their efforts to welcome modernization, which, again arguably, leads to efficiency and higher productivity. With efficiency and higher productivity comes growth, and with growth comes the improvement to the standard of living.

There are signs today that the traditional institutions in Ethiopia are modernizing themselves or are being forced to modernize at break-neck speed. Part of the influence to this modernization is coming from abroad, part of it is undertaken for self preservation, and the rest is motivated by the fact that the government institutions themselves are leading the change. It is

almost a daily fact that new government institutions are being created as fast as the proclamations enabling such are being processed.

The upside here is that economists believe that creating worthwhile and robust institutions is much more effective for development purposes than implementing wonderful sounding policies. To be sure, good policies are necessary for development, but are not a sufficient condition. What is extremely important is the nature and sophistication of the extant institutions as well as their agility and effectiveness in responding to emerging knowledge and needs. An example that needs mention here is the community health professionals model employed by the Ministry of Health in addressing child mortality and maternal care as well as in other collective community primary health care needs.

3. The Changing Educational Paradigm

No country can call itself developed if the population is uneducated or undereducated. Education has always been the pathway to acquiring the means to a good life for the majority of people. In most societies, education has long been viewed as the main instrument for achieving equality of opportunity. This has been the case in Ethiopia as well. Regardless of where you come from, regardless of your background, and regardless of what ethnic group you belong to, the notion that every one deserves the opportunity for education has had wide support in Ethiopia since I can remember. Though there is wide support, very few have had the opportunity because of endemic poverty. One of the immediate effects of poverty is that it denies individuals of the means to an opportunity.

The Ethiopian system of education has seen its ups and downs—keen and informed observers will argue, mostly downs. There are a number of central pillars to an educational system: an adequate educational budget; the curriculum and who controls it; the number and quality of teachers; the assessment system in place; the textbooks and resources available; and the role of parents. Any system that lacks any one of these, lacks the ability to provide equality of opportunity to learn.

The current system of education in Ethiopia is replete with a number of problems, and it is not the intent of this article to elaborate on those. Data shows that the number of students in the primary grades has exploded; the same data shows that the number of girls attending school is phenomenally higher than it has ever been; at the higher education level, the number of universities has risen in number from one to the current thirty two or so. On the face of it, that is significant change. But numbers do not necessarily mean quality. For example, the current policy is for schools to have local or regional control with Federal guidance. But a policy for and defense of localism or regionalism in education is a defense of inequality of opportunity

to learn. At the higher education level, the universities are designed and/or emphasize instruction as well as research to address local, regional, or country needs. This is an admirable goal, and is similar to the mission of land grant universities in the United States at a time when the country needed a trained manpower. At the end of the day, however, an educated individual is different than one merely trained to accomplish a specific task in a specific way. An educated person needs to be able to 'read' and 'write'. For example, she has to be able to measure the essentials of effective written communication: accuracy, reasoning, adequacy of evidence, good sense, ethical stance, convincing argument, meaningful organization, clarity, veracity, and critical thinking, among others. My own personal experience with graduates of the top-tier universities in Ethiopia is less than convincing. Nevertheless, the changing paradigm is the matriculation of young men and women as fast as possible and as many as possible so that they might be able to fill the growing personnel needs of business and industry as well as the developmental state itself.

4. The Defense Forces or Military Posture

It has always been a highly desired profession to be a soldier in Ethiopia. Partly as a result of the employment and upward mobility opportunities it provided in an economy where the private sector played a minor role, and partly because of the prestige, pride and accolades that come with defending the motherland, soldiering has had a steeped tradition of glory and prominence in this land. The Ethiopian army has traditionally been a lumbering giant but always an effective instrument of state and power. I am not a military historian (save for brief employment at the Ethiopian Air Force as a young man), but I sense that the current Ethiopian Defense Forces have been forged into nimble, tactical forces with the ability to alter mission and scope as fast as possible with a high degree of decentralized command. This has allowed the military to fulfill missions both in and outside of the country with efficiency and the highest degree of professionalism.

The presence of such a force or mere appearance of it has enabled the country to assume the role of a regional power broker. More importantly, it has allowed the country to concentrate on poverty eradication as opposed to managing frequent wars. The perceived strength of the defense forces has indirectly led to the observed level of peace and stability in the country as well as the region. These are unusual times in the Horn of Africa, and the opportunity to forge relationships and assure stability hinge on the perceived level of military power both by friend as well as foe.

5. The Emerging Role of Conference Tourism

Addis Ababa is emerging as the conference capital for Africans, and many international organizations. This is partly due to the fact that there are some highly respected international organizations located in Addis, such as the Economic Commission for Africa, the African Union, the IGAD Secretariat and others like it, many embassies and associated staff as well as country representatives to the African Union, just to name a few. cursory evidence shows that there have been several international meetings that have been held in Addis or are to be held there in the near future. This augurs well for the city and the country. It speaks highly of the confidence conference planners have in the security and comfort the city can provide; it speaks highly of the ever-hospitable residents of Addis; it speaks highly of the appeal of the city; the improving transport system; and even more importantly, it speaks very highly of the ever-changing Ethiopian Air Lines and the services it offers.

Despite the fact that Ethiopia has not been able to ramp up its abilities to attract tourists similar to Kenya and Tanzania or even South Africa, the opportunity to market Addis as an international conference center provides immense opportunity to develop both types of tourism in the near future. Those in positions of authority, both at the city as well as the federal level, ought to formulate a plan as well as a sustained drive to make this a reality. There are comparative advantages Addis may enjoy in this regard relative to other cities in Africa.

6. The Official Acknowledgement of Corruption As a Serious Problem

At its most recent congress, the ruling party (EPRDF) debated and acknowledged that rent-seeking activity is pervasive and should be rooted out. Psychologists tell us that one of the primary steps of solving a problem is to acknowledge its presence. Governments by their nature are secretive and opaque. It is not easy for them to admit mistakes or acknowledge the presence of major problems such as rent seeking in general, and corruption as one of its manifestations, in particular. It is not the goal of this paper to provide a detailed examination of rent-seeking activities or its meaning. Suffice it to provide a few examples: it is rent-seeking when you favor a member of your ethnic group for a job or promotion without the requisite merit; it is rent-seeking when you favor members of your ethnic group for credit; it is rent-seeking when you appoint members of your ethnic group as heads of agencies or governmental bodies; it is rent-seeking when you unduly influence investors to favor your ethnic *kilil* despite their reservations as to the returns; it is rent-seeking when you allocate land to your ethnic group only in contravention of extant policies; it is rent-seeking when you engage in mutual exchange of gratitude by accepting bribes or benefits outside of your salary for a job you were hired to do; and so on.

Rent-seeking activity is not only anti-poor and anti-development, it is also corrosive to the functions of and the trust in government, and could even lead to loss of life. A soldier who is at the battlefield, and who has been handed a gun that turned out to be defective because the inspector or official who approved the contract received bribes to overlook the defect, is a dead soldier not because of his incompetence but because of rent-seeking activity by some one along the supply chain. A building that collapses and kills hundreds of people because of shoddy construction or code violations that were overlooked by some one who was paid off to look the other way, is an example of the damage done to society because of rent-seeking activity. The tax collector who overlooks tax liabilities to the state because he was paid off, robs the poor and retards his country's development. A noted writer observed recently that Ethiopia should adopt Botswana's policy of Naming and Shaming. Yes, go ahead and be brave: Name and Shame! And when you are finished, send them to jail after disgorging all that they have accumulated. After all, if they have been paid off once, it is likely that they have been paid off many times. Corruption must be fought and defeated. Merely making it illegal is not enough.

7. Self-Confidence As An Official Policy

Justified or not, Ethiopians and their government are feeling confident. They are so confident that one is tempted to ask if that were national policy! The decision to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam; Gilgel Gibe I, II and III, and other dams; the other major projects such as the re-construction of the railway line from Djibouti to Sebeta, etc. are indicators of the confidence of the nation to overcome attendant problems. It is nearly impossible for the country to raise \$5 billion from the population to complete the GERD. But it has commenced building the dam anyway, and indeed, has even made it a national flagship project!

One is reminded of the initial objection to building the Hoover dam on the Colorado River in the United States citing the \$165 million cost as too expensive at a time when the U.S. was in the middle of the Great Depression. Today, the Hoover dam is a lifeline for millions of people from Arizona to Nevada to California and even Mexico, and has generated trillions of dollars in income since its inception. Its construction has even spawned a city—Boulder City!

No country in the history of mankind has ever developed without at the same time developing its rivers for use as a source of power; for transportation; for irrigation purposes; and for conservation.

There is confidence in the national attitude of resilience, vigor and ability to overcome. Our athletes compete well and represent the nation admirably and with integrity; our scholars are busy producing ideas, designs and creative works; our entrepreneurs are busy innovating; our engineers are busy creating; and our farmers toil hard to feed the ever-multiplying hungry mouths. Perhaps, confidence and pride are two of the most undervalued assets we have always owned collectively. What I sense now is that these attitudes seem to have infected even our neighbors, and that is a very good thing.

8. The Engagement Or Re-Engagement of the Diaspora

Despite the bluster and demonization of the Diaspora nationals, Ethiopia's apparent development is partly due to the involvement of the multitude of Ethiopians living abroad. Some of the members of the Diaspora have come home, and they have brought with them ideas and capital. These are individuals who know what capital is, and know as well, what to do with it. Those Diaspora members who still live abroad, send money home in the form of remittances to the tune of an estimated \$3 billion or more each year. Even if most of their investments are either in real estate or the services sector, they have taken significant risks in doing so. Investment is an irrevocable act and it cannot be undone. Whether one agrees with their decision to invest or not, it is their money, it is their capital, and they are free to do whatever they wish with it. The decision to invest is a personal one, and is influenced by or is a function of the rate of return one expects from the particular project. On the other hand, and equally, the decision to remit is a function of the wishes of one's relatives to live in relative comfort and the desire of the sender to help them accomplish that. I have never personally ascribed a political or philanthropic character to my own actions in that regard. But it is undeniable that the Diaspora has always cared and will continue to care about the motherland, and as a result, will further enhance its engagement in one form or another.

9. The Presence of Relative Peace and Stability

Certainly, there are tensions under the surface, but the country is apparently pursuing its development work with vigor. Brothers and sisters are working literally day and night in what appears to be a mission like effort to complete projects and initiatives. The relative calm on the borders to the West, East and South has contributed to the de-escalation of tensions in the region. The containment and, perhaps, defeat of Al Shabab in Somalia, the emasculation of Eritrea, and the containment of irredentist groups internally, have all provided the opportunity to focus on the necessary work for development. In an opinion piece I wrote under the title of "A Looming War and The Ethiopian Predicament" in 2006, I argued in favor of securing the Southern border by

removing the Islamic Courts group from Somalia. In yet another piece titled "A Proud Country Humiliated", I wrote in favor of the government providing the best security it can afford for those involved in development work regardless of where in the country. And in a most recent article titled, " Not Just About Salvation and Religious Freedom", I articulated the dangers of extremism and the need to pursue a policy of moderation, inclusion and understanding in order to continue the current development trajectory.

It appears to me that Ethiopians are tired and fed-up with conflict that does not lead to the improvement of their conditions. Similar to other peoples all over the globe, Ethiopians wish to have a reasonably better life for their children and grandchildren. They also do not wish to see their country left behind. And for all the chest thumping and self-congratulations taking place among the political elite, there are other African countries doing just as well or better than Ethiopia depending on what is being measured. Yes, the resource base may be different, but there are countries doing just as well these days from the perspective of economic development. This is not the time to rest or to feel accomplished. Ethiopia needs every able-bodied individual, party member or not, to help build the future. It is incumbent upon every one, particularly the government, to help pave a solid and sustainable pathway to development for the benefit of all.

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